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SUBJECT: CANADIAN CONSERVATIVES HIT A DOUBLE AT CONVENTION

REF: QUEBEC 00035

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Conservative Party of Canada held its biennial convention in Montreal March 17 to 19. It was the party's first policy and leadership review convention since the merger of the Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance parties in December 2003. On issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, the party portrayed a reasonable balance between the staunch social conservative wing that wants to stand firm on principle and let the country move in its direction, and the more progressive moderates who believe a centrist position is the party's only hope of ever governing. The Conservatives also managed a high-stakes issue that threatened to split the party during the constitutional session, and leader Stephen Harper passed his first leadership review with 84 percent approval. The convention will likely provide a slight bounce in the polls, but not the kind of breakthrough in urban Ontario and Quebec that the Tories need to win an election. The Conservatives have now established a strong base camp, but have a good deal of climbing ahead if they are to reach the summit. END SUMMARY.

At Last, a Policy Book to Call Our Own

2. (SBU) Having never had a policy convention, the Conservatives were at a disadvantage during the 2004 election. Their lack of a declared policy agenda allowed the Liberals to contend that the Conservatives were masking a "hidden agenda," particularly on issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion. This convention was the first opportunity the Conservatives have had to clearly spell out the party's positions, while showing a united front between the merged factions. By holding the convention in Montreal and having French-speakers prominent, they also hoped to make inroads in Quebec, and by having younger conservatives at the podium, hoped to make gains in urban Ontario.

3. (SBU) The convention was held at the massive convention center (Palais de Congres) with a large Canadian flag as the wall centerpiece, and was a mix of caucuses, plenary decision meetings, and well-funded social gatherings. The 2,900 delegates came in scruffy western attire, urban chic, and bright yellow Harper t-shirts. Poloff, PolFSN, and Montreal CG attended and met with dozens of delegates. Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper made the keynote address on March 18, and former Progressive Conservative leader Brian Mulroney was prominently featured in the video presentation that introduced the leader. Harper listed a litany of "scandalous" conduct on the part of the governing Liberals, from the ad-sponsorship scandal, the gun registry, "strippergate" and others. Harper turned the refrain of Prime Minister Martin's convention speech, "Promises Made, Promises Kept" to a lengthy review of "Promises Made, Promises Broken." Harper dismissed the Bloc Quebecois as a political force, saying they were incapable of instituting change, even if they stayed around for another 100 years.

4. (SBU) Media predictions that issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion would never make the floor in a tightly-scripted show were wrong - they did and were vigorously debated, in what in the end was a mix of center and rightist positions that accurately reflects the party's dilemma of how far to stray from its roots to attract new voters. The willingness to compromise on social values comes from the sense that the party is finally moving in the direction of actually being able to win an election, and not just criticizing the governing Liberals. The party wants to keep this momentum without losing its soul in the process. It causes a good deal of creative tension that was evident on the floor.

5. (SBU) One key measure, a pledge that the party would not introduce new anti-abortion legislation, was passed by a very close margin, and its success was greeted with loud applause. On same-sex marriage, however, appeals from moderate progressives such as Belinda Stronach that too strong a position would alienate the party from mainstream Canada were dismissed. The party voted 75-25 in favor of a measure that affirmed the party's position that marriage is between one man and one woman. The party also abandoned populist resolutions for recall rules for Members of Parliament, fixed-date elections and referendums on issues

of national importance, all pillars of the earlier Canadian Alliance party. Other noteworthy resolutions called to expand the Canadian Forces, cut taxes, repeal the federal gun registry, address the fiscal imbalance, and make the appointment of senior officials (Supreme Court, Auditor General, Ethics Commissioner, etc.) an accountable process. Though it was not a stand-alone policy resolution, Stephen Harper also referred to missile defense in his keynote address, stating that while the Conservatives would not sign up for an agreement they have not seen, they would return to the table on missile defense and other issues with the United States.

Constitutional Conflict Overblown

16. (SBU) One of the most contentious issues faced by the party was a constitutional resolution forwarded by Ontario MP Scott Reid that would have tied the delegate selection process to the number of party members in a riding, allowing ridings with more party members (predominantly in the former Canadian Alliance West) to send more delegates. Deputy leader Peter MacKay was livid over the idea, which he maintained violated a founding principle of the merger of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives that all ridings would be treated equally. He was concerned that the move would alienate regions where the party was weak and thus destroy any potential these ridings had to develop through active participation. The issue was the highlight of CBC's afternoon radio broadcast and the print media, and it trumped Harper's keynote speech, even though all the delegates we talked to insisted that the resolution was a non-issue and bound to fail, which it did handily. The coverage resulted in Conservative complaints of media bias.

Don't Trust Anybody Under 30

17. (SBU) The Conservatives were also narrowly split on whether to create a youth wing along the lines of the former Progressive Conservative Youth, or the current Young Liberals of Canada. The confused process called for delegates to vote for one of three options, and the status quo (i.e. no youth wing) was selected. Status quo advocates argued that if young people are interested, they will join the party and participate as regular members, and not be shunted off to a youth ghetto. Youth wing advocates argued that the party needs to reach out to youth and provide a forum where they can better develop their issues and have their input valued. It does not appear that either side of the debate is familiar with the Young Liberals of Canada, who have a deep policy agenda, great enthusiasm and energy, and demonstrated the highest level of organization of all commissions at the recent Liberal Party Convention. Absent a youth wing, the Conservative Party will have minimal presence on Canada's university campuses, and the party will not have access to the same ready-made, energetic and organized volunteers as the Liberals.

Stephen Harper at the Helm

18. (SBU) A key event was the referendum on Stephen Harper's leadership. A small lobby handing out anti-Harper buttons and pamphlets early in the convention appeared to have little impact as Harper garnered an 84 percent approval rate. One anti-Harper delegate tried to convince a group of colleagues on their way to vote after Harper's Friday night speech, but her argument amounted to "trust me, I know," something the delegates found amusing. In reality there was no real alternative for a party trying to show unity and strength to sticking up for Harper. To his credit, he has done a fine job of strengthening the party and bringing the various factions together. Many party members at the Convention described his address Friday night as his best performance to date, and Montreal CG, Poloff and PolFSN in attendance saw a Harper who was secure and upbeat. In English and French, both the delivery and the message were fully on cue.

19. (SBU) As it did at the Liberal convention, the media felt compelled to throw out names of possible Harper successors, but had a more difficult time doing so as there was no campaign, even behind the scenes, to develop an alternative to Harper's leadership. Members of Parliament Peter MacKay and Belinda Stronach were mentioned, as was Premier of New Brunswick, Bernard Lord. The latter would appear to be the most interesting. Two delegates told Poloff that as much as they like Harper personally, until the party picks an Easterner as leader, the center of gravity will remain stuck in the West. This would keep the party unable to penetrate essential ridings in voter-rich Ontario and Quebec. Stronach is also someone to watch; her three interventions on the floor (pro same-sex marriage, pro-US trade, and pro-youth wing) were clearly meant to establish her as the progressive, centrist alternative to the Western cul-de-sac,

even though in the House of Commons she appears to play second fiddle to Alberta's Rona Ambrose.

Quebec - The "Show Me" Province

110. (SBU) According the Conservative MPs Jason Kenny and Jay Hill, the party selected Montreal as the location for its convention to garner attention in Quebec, as well as, indirectly, in southern, urban Ontario. Several young Conservative delegates agreed that prior to the convention there was simply no coverage of the party in Quebec media. The Montreal venue would finally bring the party back into the provincial line-of-sight. They also pointed out that it was clear from his speech that Harper's ability in French is rapidly improving. Reftel provides views from Quebec City on how effective the party's outreach in the Province may have been.

111. (SBU) COMMENT: Only time, and public opinion polls, will tell if the Conservatives successfully managed the opportunity to define their policies and address the negative impressions the Liberals have thus far so successfully exploited. They may have placed themselves on the radar in Quebec, but appear to lack the potential for a breakthrough they need to win an election. As was the case with the Liberals, post-convention rhetoric is of high energy levels and confidence to face the polls. It will take a federal election campaign (now rumored for next spring), however, to demonstrate whether they can take the foundation they built at the convention and use it to build a credible alternative to the Liberals. END COMMENT.